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IRANIAN STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL
PLANNING AGAINST THE UNITED STATES

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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15. Abstract: The Arabian Gulf is a vital interest to the U.S., its allies and the world economy. To Iran it represents the arena in which it can regain its once-held regional power and secure the economic resources to rebuild an unstable infrastructure. It will ultimately determine the nation's future. Iran likely believes it can achieve its strategic objective of higher oil prices by forcing the withdrawal of U.S. regional military presence, after which it can exert its influence on OPEC and the world market. Plausible Iranian planning towards this end must include interdependent political/diplomatic and military elements. The initial political element could exploit Gulf Arab conciliatory tendencies, outside pressure and intimidation to isolate the U.S. and deny it forward basing rights. The military element could succeed in inflicting enough damage on U.S. naval forces over a sufficient period if properly sequenced and synchronized at the right location. If planned considering the elements of operational design, using U.S. planning methodology against its enemy, Iran could be successful.	

Abstract ofIRANIAN STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL PLANNING
AGAINST THE UNITED STATES

The Arabian Gulf is a vital interest to the United States, its allies and to the world economy due to its oil and gas resources. To Iran it represents the arena in which it can regain the regional power and influence it once enjoyed. The Gulf is the key to the economic resources which could rebuild Iran's unstable infrastructure and ultimately determine the nation's future. However, the reasonable prices for Gulf oil that the United States and its leading regional ally, Saudi Arabia, espouse are unlikely to provide Iran the capital it desires. Iran likely believes it can achieve its strategic objective of higher oil prices by forcing the withdrawal of U.S. regional military presence, after which it can exert its influence to force OPEC action or market reaction.

Plausible Iranian planning towards this end must include interdependent political/diplomatic and military elements. The initial political element could exploit Gulf Arab conciliatory tendencies, outside pressure from nations dependent on Gulf oil and carefully crafted intimidation to isolate the United States from its allies and deny it forward basing rights. The military element could succeed in inflicting enough damage on U.S. naval forces over a sufficient period of time to achieve its objective if properly synchronized at the right location. Iran military rebuilding efforts and exercises appear to be directed towards such a contingency. If planned while considering the elements of operational design, using U.S. planning methodology against its enemy, Iran could be successful.

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I. Introduction and Conflict Context

The recognition of the Arabian Gulf as a vital interest to the United States and its allies is beyond debate. Barring some revolutionary technological breakthrough that eclipses the significance of the region's energy resources, it will remain vital for the foreseeable future. The Arabian Gulf, however, is subject to numerous historical enmities and competing rivalries that threaten its stability and preclude effective intra-regional security mechanisms. Desert Storm effectively neutralized the hegemonic aspirations of Iraq for the short to mid-term, but allowed Iran to regain near parity with its historical rival and emerge as the greatest long term threat to regional stability.

Iran in the 20th century was a battleground for various competing interests, continuously forced to respond to shifting threats and pressures.¹ It was ruled over, divided among rival powers and exploited, creating a strong resentment of outside, particularly Western, interference. That resentment was effectively institutionalized after the 1979 revolution when Iran overwhelmingly repudiated the United States as the corrupter of Iranian society. A "state of national emergency" has officially characterized U.S.-Iranian relations ever since.

The ensuing years have offered Iran few opportunities to dispute U.S. regional domination. Attempts to export the revolution and intimidation tactics have made the Gulf Arab states fearful of Iranian intentions and driven them into closer ties with the West. A military significantly weakened by war with Iraq and the loss of many sources of resupply have also hampered an effective challenge. However, within the recent past, Iran appears to have begun to prepare its return as a Gulf power. Only the United States seems to stand in the way. **Iran may believe it could soon rid the region of the U.S.**

presence through a carefully crafted strategic and operational plan of concerted diplomatic rapprochement with its neighbors and a focused military intervention.

A. U.S. National Security Strategy and Strategic Objectives

U.S. national security strategy in the Gulf region is designed to provide security for Arab allies and protect vital interests -- namely to ensure uninterrupted access to regional resources *at reasonable prices*. But, reasonable prices for whom and why? As of 1994, the United States relied upon petroleum for approximately 40% of its total energy needs. Domestic production accounted for the majority of that total, but as domestic sources steadily dwindle, the United States will likely soon become reliant on imports for over half of its needs.² OPEC sources will probably provide a significant portion of those imports, perhaps much more than the approximately 25% of total U.S. consumption it currently supplies.³ Western Europe and the Asian-Pacific region offer even more striking figures. The latter is expected to see dependence on Gulf oil imports grow to over 60% by 2000, while Japan and Korea are almost totally import-dependent.⁴

As dependence upon Persian Gulf oil exports grows so also grows the damage that could be done to the world economy by upheaval in the region. Oil market reaction to key international events is almost instantaneous; so sensitive that the mere threat of unrest in the Gulf can send oil prices soaring. And with any substantial increase in prices comes concomitant effects on economic performance. When oil prices rose in the third quarter of 1990, a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. economy entered a recession.⁵ Reasonable prices, then, become an objective as much for the sake of key U.S. allies and the world economy as for the United States.

U.S. strategy translates into policies of deterring threats to regional stability and preventing the emergence of an aggressor state that threatens independent nations.⁶ In more practical terms, the United States relies on a three-tiered approach: dual containment of Iraq and Iran; efforts to increase the collective defense capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states; and a robust U.S. military forward presence.

Containment of Iran is designed to redress the Iranian actions the U.S. finds unacceptable -- support to terrorism, obstruction of the Arab-Israeli peace process, pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and human rights abuses⁷. Most emphasis is placed on economic sanctions as a means of impacting Iran's weapons-buying capacity and to be coercive in itself. U.S. steps have exacerbated somewhat Iran's already severe economic problems, but few other nations, particularly those West European states and Japan dependent on Gulf oil, have followed the U.S. lead as closely.

Despite the GCC's preference for a secure, predictable regional environment, its overall military weakness and predisposition *against* any strong long-term commitments to alliances effectively preclude a viable regional security mechanism. Foreign policies in which domestic security is ultimately paramount, and which stress promoting consensus and maintaining bridges to *all* states, have instead promoted the value and general acceptance of a discreet U.S. protective umbrella.⁸ The United States has accepted this position willingly, stationing significant forces in the region to support defense agreements and enhance stability.

B. Iranian National Security Strategy and Strategic Objectives

The reconstitution of the Fifth Fleet in 1995 reinforced the Iranian perception that the United States is determined to encircle it and force a confrontation.⁹ For nearly 10

years after the 1979 revolution Iran's confrontational policies produced little but suspicion among its Arab neighbors, derision from most of the West and a devastated economy. Iran has only relatively recently begun to emerge from isolation. It seems to have recognized the mistakes of the immediate post-revolution period and realized it could improve its situation only if "constructively engaged" with the other Gulf states. Iran has proceeded slowly, gradually transitioning from expansionism to coexistence, and always enacting policy based ultimately on domestic considerations.¹⁰

As the overarching domestic concern, the Iranian economy is the element that likely determines both internal and foreign policy. Its pitiable state is exemplified by a 75% drop in per capita foreign exchange earnings since 1979 and ruinous foreign debt.¹¹ The massive infrastructure damage inflicted during the war with Iraq began the downward spiral. However, the continued crisis is largely a consequence of low oil prices (crude sales account for approximately 85% of Iran's total foreign exchange earnings) and the mostly self-inflicted inability to manage efficiently and attract foreign investment.¹²

The price of oil, then, emerges as perhaps **the** most important domestic and foreign policy determinant, possibly even the success of the revolution and the future of Iran.¹³ However, a rise in the price of oil, as a strategic objective, is problematic for Iran. Saudi Arabia, as the leading oil producer and controlling influence within OPEC, wants to keep prices moderate to ensure oil's long-term use and importance. Market forces also tend to moderate prices when an oil glut and relative peace stabilize the market.

II. Iranian Desired End-State

From Iran's perspective, the United States is a force for moderate prices, supporting Saudi pricing policies and providing a sizable military presence that creates a

relatively stable security environment. Iran would naturally assume that, as an operational objective, a significantly reduced or withdrawn U.S. military presence would allow it to exert much more influence on Saudi Arabia and prices. With the most powerful Gulf navy, Iran would return to its dominant regional position and be able to directly effect the flow and price of oil. This becomes Iran's desired end-state. As Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati has noted: "Our most important and strategic border is our southern coastline: the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. The region is vital to us... We cannot remain indifferent to its fate."¹⁴

Achieving this end is the Iranian challenge, for it entails a fundamental change in the regional balance of power. As such Iran must initiate a balanced program containing both political/diplomatic and military operational-level objectives. Politically, Iran's "constructive engagement" philosophy should attempt reconciliation with its Gulf neighbors and strategic European and Asian nations, undercutting U.S. containment policies and driving a wedge between it and potential allies.

Recent initiatives support this strategy. Increased diplomatic links and softened rhetoric against the Gulf states exploit their predisposition towards conciliation. While Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have remained somewhat wary of Iran's unpredictability and intentions, Oman, Qatar and the UAE have remained on good terms with Iran, even during the war.¹⁵ Behind the diplomatic drive are assurances Iran has no territorial ambitions nor plans to export the revolution. The intent is to deprive the Gulf states of the direct threat that would prompt calls for U.S. assistance, allow basing rights and forge a U.S.-Arab coalition.

Additional initiatives can reinforce the strategy outside the Gulf. West European and Japanese dependence on Gulf oil present particularly attractive opportunities. If Iran can guarantee their continued access to oil, either unilaterally or through cooperation with other Gulf producers, their accommodation would pose a distinct strategic advantage. Investment opportunities in Iran provide additional pressure, exploiting the divisiveness U.S. sanctions have created with other industrial nations. Several countries have commercial incentives to secure more business with Iran -- a factor likely to be a major influence in those nations where, unlike the United States, the foreign policy apparatus is sensitive to commercial interests.¹⁶

The military element should reinforce political/diplomatic efforts, providing the requisite regional security, but also preparing for an anticipated U.S. challenge. Iran contends that the Gulf States can provide for their own security, particularly recently when some regional threats have subsided. Specific mention is made of the checks placed on Iraq as a result of Desert Storm and the dissolution of the Soviet Union as an expansionist threat. The latter is particularly noteworthy in that the United States can no longer claim a communist threat as a pretext for continued presence

While the GCC has as yet been unable to build an effective security alliance, Iran has steadily rebuilt its military as a viable alternative. As a result of losses sustained during the war with Iraq and subsequent engagements with the United States, and the technological gaps created by the arms purchases of the Gulf states, a nearly complete rearmament of Iran's military was a necessity.¹⁷ Emphasis in the buildup has been on air and naval forces, and missile technology. It is these forces which have the greatest potential impact on direct control of Gulf waters and Gulf Arab perceptions. If Iran is to

secure U.S. withdrawal from the Gulf, it must have the military capability to deny automatic control of the Gulf to U.S. naval forces, the heart of U.S. regional power, intimidate Gulf Arabs and effectively control area waters.

Intimidation has been an element of Iranian foreign and military policy since even before the revolution. Whether it is the looming threat of exported militant fundamentalism or gunboat coercion, intimidation will likely continue to be a staple of Iranian strategy. Iran must take care, however, not drive the Gulf states into U.S. arms, particularly when considering WMDs. While publicly denying any intention to acquire nuclear weapons and renouncing chemical and biological weapons on moral grounds, Iran can still defend its WMD capabilities in order to offset Iraq and Israel, and deter the United States. Iran can use the intimidation factor of these weapons by rhetorically denying the intent to use them, but leaving their existence an open secret and the threat implicit. Revolutionary Guard Corps control over the inventory certainly promotes the ambiguity of Iranian intentions.

Iran cannot hope to defeat the United States in any conventional, set-piece military operation. What it can do is threaten unacceptable damage and the free flow of oil on which the United States and its allies depend. Iranian operational planning towards this end, if conducted keeping many of the principles of operational design in mind, and using U.S. planning methodology against its adversary, could produce a feasible way for Iran to achieve its objectives.

III. U.S. Critical Factors

Iranian operational planning begins with the identification of U.S. critical factors. U.S. enemies have focused on its national will to fight as a strategic center of gravity

(COG) since Vietnam. The prospect of large numbers of casualties is widely held to be a governing factor in whether public support will authorize or maintain the U.S. commitment to military operations. The United States also stresses the importance of coalition and joint warfare in its current doctrine. Normally, coalition support would be considered a critical strength, particularly when operations are conducted ostensibly for the partners' benefit. However, in this case where the United States would quite likely proceed unilaterally, coalition support becomes a critical weakness and vulnerability. If its diplomatic and/or intimidation efforts are successful, Iran may be able to deny the United States the coalition support that would legitimize intervention and permit forward basing of U.S. air forces in the Gulf. Without these assets, the U.S. Navy becomes the operational COG, still eminently capable but somewhat weakened by fewer joint support assets. With forward Navy assets as the primary operating force, logistical sustainment becomes a critical strength, vital for the accomplishment of U.S. objectives.

C4ISR has become a nearly automatic critical strength for the United States. The increasing reliance on precision weapons, positive hostile identification and doctrinal need for Information Warfare (IW) dominance demand precise information on enemy targets, force movements and command and control communications (C3) architecture.

U.S. critical weaknesses include the perennial mine countermeasures (MCM) capabilities, needed to secure the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for both commercial and naval shipping, against a large and increasingly sophisticated Iranian mine inventory. MCM is time consuming, requiring a relatively secure environment in which to operate. Naval forces would also be dependent on long supply lines possibly open to

interdiction. Each of these weaknesses could transition to a critical vulnerability due to their direct relation to the U.S. naval COG and their vulnerability to attack.

Prospective Iranian actions against these U.S. critical factors are numerous and varied. Diplomatic efforts outlined in section II above could be combined with specific military actions to isolate the U.S. politically and militarily. Iran can attempt to recreate and exploit the contentious public and congressional pre-Desert Storm debates on casualties to sap U.S. national will. It could also press the value of going to war for someone else's oil on the public relations front.

Against the navy COG, Iran must avoid conventional air and surface attacks against large formations of U.S. units outside the range of land-based defenses. The risk of losing precious few modern assets is too great against the limited probability of success. A better tactic would be 1-2 low, high-speed aircraft or submarine attacks against isolated, high value targets; better still would be to let U.S. units approach to within range of coastal missiles, mines, shallow water operating submarines, missile patrol boats and attack aircraft. U.S. units operating within the Arabian Gulf would be subject to a variety of threats from several directions. Vital logistics support provided at the end of long supply lines suffers from several of the same vulnerabilities. Libya proved in 1984 that the Red Sea could be mined by a commercial ship; Iran has fairly extensive covert mining experience and could be even more dangerous if assisted by its erstwhile ally Sudan or possibly Yemen. Supply ships arriving from the Pacific and Indian Oceans could be equally as vulnerable to Iranian submarine or attack aircraft if not properly protected. The mine threat is even more significant close to Iranian waters. Not only are larger areas

subject to mining, but reseeded and short-notice mining are complicating factors, all within range of land-based air and missile defenses, and missile patrol boats.

Denying the U.S. superiority in C4ISR is problematic for Iran due to its technological inferiority. However, fighting a high tech enemy with low tech means has the advantage of simplicity. Dispersing munitions, weapons and C3 facilities to hardened underground shelters and alternate sites can confound U.S. targeting. Weapons could also be placed adjacent to religious and civilian locations to take advantage of the U.S. aversion to collateral damage. Naval and air units could avoid detection by frequent and covert movement to alternate airfields, among islands or within commercial anchorages. Finally, Iran could resist U.S. penetration of its C3 by fostering its already enigmatic national decision-making apparatus and relying on more secure, reliable communications. The intent is to manipulate the U.S. perception of Iranian capabilities and intent through the magnification of the threat, thereby reducing U.S. freedom of action, and forcing the use of unwanted/unplanned branches and sequels. Each of these actions contribute to Iran's objective of controlling the flow of oil and thus its price.

IV. Elements of the Operational Idea

The Iranian operational scheme must be carefully crafted for it to succeed in the face of U.S. technological superiority. It must skillfully determine where and at what intensity U.S. naval and air forces will be engaged. It will not always be possible to position adequate forces to attack key elements of the U.S. COG directly. Limited modern Iranian naval and air attack resources and sustainment capabilities preclude wasting its forces for the sake of damaging the highest value U.S. units when the prospect of smaller, incremental victories could offer a greater degree of overall success.¹⁸

In general, an effective operational scheme could proceed as follows: The preparatory diplomatic and public relations phase divides the United States from its allies and sets the conditions for military operations. If/when successful, Iranian planners can assume the United States will attempt to forcibly reestablish its control, likely concentrating its forces, and engaging in a show of force, before pressing towards the Gulf. Iran should refrain from immediate engagements that would lead to a protracted operation, instead allowing U.S. naval forces to approach the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz. Once within range, Iran should attempt to inflict as much damage as quickly as possible in hopes of reaching the U.S. threshold of pain. Ideally, this operation should be conducted when Iran has effectively incorporated its newest and most modern assets into its inventory; after the U.S. military has completed the next anticipated round of force reductions, and it is either distracted by further Iraqi actions or has reduced its presence due to the repeal of UN sanctions; and, West European and Japanese dependence on Gulf oil has increased to the point where even short term supply disruptions will create significant pressure on the United States. Tactically, it should also wait for a gap in CVBG and ARG presence in the Gulf.

This Iranian operational idea contains a multi-tiered and interdependent **method of defeating the enemy**. Diplomatic initiatives and interdiction of U.S. supply lines are indirect methods that will attack both strategic and operations COGs. With a decisive lack of overwhelming force, direct methods should not look towards decisive engagements, but rather a properly timed and synchronized "nibbling at the edges" against isolated, vulnerable units until larger enemy forces can be brought within range of more concentrated land-based defenses. This **application of forces** is decidedly more judicious

in protecting Iran's own COG and the decisive points of the Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz and southern Iranian coast. It also provides **the proper amount of massed force in the sector of main effort and point of main defense.**

By waiting until U.S. forces approach the Gulf of Oman and Strait, Iran gains the leverage of relative freedom of action and initiative by isolating the U.S. COG. It also maximizes its intelligence capabilities to accurately locate U.S. forces and gain surprise. This operational **counter-maneuver** provides Iran the greatest force-to-space ratio and most favorable lines of operation -- short, multiple and interior. Numerous Iranian naval exercises over the past two years have focused on just such an operation.¹⁹

Supporting activities for this scheme are critical to its success. Diplomatic/public relations and intimidation efforts have the effects of non-lethal **operational fires** when used to isolate U.S. forces and achieve operational objectives. So too will more lethal disruptions of U.S. logistics support, provided they are properly sequenced and synchronized in the operational plan to preclude premature initiation of hostilities, or are deniable. Operational **deception** actions can also provide significant support in concealing its actions and intentions. One possible tactic would be to conduct diversionary operations against disputed islands or oil fields in the Gulf, a regular facet of Iranian exercises, until U.S. forces are drawn into the heart of Iranian defenses. Likely familiarity with U.S. intelligence capabilities through past encounters and traditionally good OPSEC procedures would reinforce this deception.

Sequencing and synchronization of the operation will be key in determining if Iran can avoid an unwinnable war of attrition. Operations must proceed quickly if Iran is to

maintain the requisite tempo and momentum. Otherwise it faces the prospect of reaching its culminating point.

Some branches to the plan may be available: if the U.S. chooses to stand off and weaken Iranian defenses over time before proceeding into the Gulf, Iran can only hope that this temporary hold over oil flow and "neutralization" of U.S. control will last long enough for short term oil market disruptions to generate enough outside pressure to force the end of hostilities; if the United States successfully penetrates the Gulf, Iran may resort to threatening or using WMDs to achieve its objectives, or retire to fight another day; and if the United States plans an amphibious operation to capture coastal areas, Iran can heavily mine suspected beach approaches as a deterrent, a lesson learned from Desert Storm, or make a concerted attack against amphibious forces in order to inflict significant casualties.

This operational scheme, if properly executed, could neutralize or sufficiently damage the U.S. COG that **coordinated** diplomatic pressure ensures Iran achieves its strategic objective. It demonstrates a boldness in planning and execution, perhaps uncharacteristic of a nation facing a much more powerful adversary, but certainly possible from an Iran driven by the needs of a crippled economy and a near pathological hatred of the United States.. And the scheme makes full use of ambiguity, speed and surprise within the capabilities of its military.²⁰

V. Conclusion - Iranian Planning and the Four Questions.

The success of Iranian strategic and operational planning to gain control over the flow of Gulf oil will ultimately depend on its ability to coordinate mutually dependent political/diplomatic and military elements. Political initiatives will help isolate the United

States and set some of the battlefield conditions, but it will be left to the Iranian military to somehow impose its will against an almost certain U.S. challenge. The condition it must produce is the ability to deny automatic U.S. control of Gulf shipping. The ways in which it can succeed are by either neutralizing U.S. maritime forces through de facto control of its strategic waters or by inflicting sufficient casualties or damage to force conciliation.

Iran has the requisite military resources (means) to accomplish its objective. A concerted military buildup since 1989 has provided the weapons that pose the greatest potential impact on U.S. and regional forces -- submarines, mines, anti-ship and ballistic missiles, high performance attack aircraft and WMDs. Increased training has also concentrated on the type of operations most useful in this scenario. The risks Iran faces in challenging the United States for control of the Gulf are significant, but perhaps not prohibitive. The possible loss of its naval and southern coast defenses would preclude Iranian interference in Gulf military matters for many years. But it is unlikely any neighbor would attempt to exploit the situation for territorial gains. In addition, Western and Asian nations would still rely on Iran for oil and gas exports. The rewards, however, are likely even greater. Higher oil prices would help improve many of the economic conditions that provoke increasing Iranian social discontent and threaten the survival of the revolution.

NOTES

- ¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, After the Storm, The Changing Military Balance in the Middle East (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1993), 387.
- ² Jim Hart, "World Dependence on Persian Gulf Oil: Strategic Concerns and Market Reality", Naval War College Review, Spring 1994, 111-112.
- ³ Congressional Quarterly, The Middle East, (Washington DC: 1994), 144.
- ⁴ Hart, 112.
- ⁵ Ibid., 114.
- ⁶ White House, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, (Washington DC: February 1996), 42-43.
- ⁷ Peter Tarnoff, "Statement", U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, (Washington DC: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., Oct 11 1995).
- ⁸ Gerd Nonneman, "The GCC and the Islamic Republic: Towards a Restoration of the Pattern", Iran and the International Community, (New York, NY: Routledge Books 1991), 102-3.
- ⁹ James Bruce, "Choking the Strait", Jane's Intelligence Review, September 1996, 412.
- ¹⁰ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Wheels Within Wheels: Iran's Foreign Policy Towards the Arab World", Reconstruction and Regional Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf, (New York, NY: Routledge Books 1992), 174-179.
- ¹¹ Patrick Clawson, Iran's Challenge to the West: How, When, and Why, The Washington Institute Policy Papers No.33, (Washington DC, 1993), 24-27.
- ¹² George Joffe, "Iran Tearing Itself Apart", Jane's Intelligence Review, October 1995, 447.
- ¹³ Shahram Chubin, Iran's National Security Policy: Capabilities, Intentions, and Impact, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 1994, 78.
- ¹⁴ Bruce, 412.
- ¹⁵ Nonneman, 116-117.
- ¹⁶ Clawson, 93.
- ¹⁷ Dr Andrew Rathmell, "Iran's Rearmament - How Great a Threat?", Jane's Intelligence Review, July 1994, 317.
- ¹⁸ Milan Vego, "Fundamentals of Operational Design", U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Dept, August 1996, 11.
- ¹⁹ Bruce, 412.

²⁰ Vego, 9.

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